

From the Wyoming Department of Health

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Medicaid and Wyoming: Why it Matters

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Access to quality medical care is a goal we should all embrace for ourselves, for our families and for all Wyoming residents.

Wyoming EqualityCare, our state's Medicaid program, pays for the healthcare many of our state's low-income and medically vulnerable citizens desperately need. Medicaid is roughly a 50-50 financial partnership between states and the federal government. The federal contribution is calculated every federal fiscal year using the relationship of Wyoming's average per capita income to the national average per capita income.

Why is this important? Medicaid does not just serve a small group of people. Approximately 81,000 Wyoming residents qualified for the program in the last fiscal year, which represents 15 percent of our population. Wyoming EqualityCare accounts for about 12 percent of the entire budget of Wyoming's state government, annually spending about \$500 million.

Any big change to the program or adjustment to its budget affects us all in one way or another. The money does not just disappear down a bureaucratic black hole; it is spent with local doctors, hospitals, nursing homes and other healthcare providers in every Wyoming community.

The impacts on healthcare due to Wyoming EqualityCare are far-reaching and significant:

- There were 8,015 births to Wyoming residents in 2008. Of these, 42 percent were paid for by Medicaid.
- Medicaid pays for 42 percent of nursing home care expenses in Wyoming.
- Providers who serve developmentally disabled clients receive nearly 100 percent of their income from Medicaid.
- Medicaid pays for approximately 12 percent of hospital care in Wyoming.
- 8.8 percent of Wyoming physicians' reimbursement is from Medicaid.

Over the last year Wyoming has seen a dramatic increase in Medicaid expenditures, primarily due to increased enrollment and higher costs. With Wyoming's unemployment rate at 7.4 percent, the highest rate the state has seen in 20 years, more people are qualifying for Medicaid.

With declining state revenues, difficult decisions may be needed about this program. It is important to carefully consider how potential budget cuts affect not only Medicaid clients, but also the Wyoming healthcare system overall. National healthcare reform efforts are also looming on the horizon, and it's hard to predict how our Medicaid program in Wyoming will be affected.

Wyoming EqualityCare is one of the most conservative Medicaid programs in the United States. For example, coverage for parents and caretaker relatives with dependent children is available only when family income is less than approximately \$8,000 per year for a family of four. Children and aged, blind or disabled individuals are covered at higher income levels. There is no coverage for single childless adults unless they are aged, blind or disabled.

To maintain Medicaid's viability in Wyoming, many complex issues need to be tackled. For us to simply sit back and wait for state revenues to recover is not acceptable. We can and must do better. Possible solutions include:

- Incentives for clients. People need to take responsibility for their own health. They should eat more responsibly, exercise more, discontinue tobacco products, take advantage of immunizations and early childhood health screening, and be more diligent about other health screening opportunities such as mammography, colonoscopy and other routine procedures.
- Incentives for healthcare providers. Our primary healthcare providers need to be adequately reimbursed for promoting healthy lifestyles and ensuring our Medicaid clients receive these services.
- Emergency rooms should not be used as primary care clinics. The expense incurred in an emergency room is astronomical when compared to the expense incurred for a similar condition in a healthcare provider's office.
- Quality and consistent prenatal care is paramount in obtaining good obstetrical outcomes and should continue to be a strong focus for Medicaid.
- With limited resources it's critical that people are well educated and understand what can and should be done to care for their particular problem. This also includes an understanding of the cost of care and how it relates to their current illness, an aspect of medical care that has been essentially ignored by those who are healthcare consumers.
- Redundant and duplicative medical procedures must be minimized or eliminated to help curb medical costs. This can be at least partially addressed with the broad implementation of the electronic medical record.

Whether it's the debate on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C or the decisions to be made in Wyoming about Medicaid, we all have a stake in the outcomes. Children must have access to a healthcare system where medical problems can be diagnosed early, when interventions will be most meaningful. Young women must receive appropriate prenatal care to ensure healthy babies. And let's not forget the elderly and frail, people with developmental disabilities, or those struggling with mental illness. These are all important people in Wyoming who deserve the best care possible.

So let's proceed with caution when it comes to Wyoming EqualityCare. Our ultimate goal must be to ensure continued access to quality care throughout our great state.

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